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Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, teacher of Christian freedom

In man's daily experience, as he acts and forms his individuality and his personality, the first principle is the will; and freedom is the nerve centre of the will. Modern thought has exalted freedom, making of it man's constituent element, and making freedom its own foundation. Thus freedom has been defined as the spontaneity of reason and of feeling, as the will for power . . . and this has led the Western world to its present-day situation of opposing tensions, being either at the mercy of totalitarian regimes or in the chaos of anarchic movements. Lacking a transcendental basis, freedom has taken itself as its own object: it has become an empty freedom, the freedom of being free, a law unto itself; for it is in fact freedom without law, its only law being the explosion of the instincts, the tyranny of absolute Reason which immediately becomes the whim of the tyrant. Modern thought, in its most coherent form, in rejecting metaphysics has destroyed all ethics, because ethics demands an absolute distinction between good and evil, between truth and falsehood. But this distinction in its turn demands an absolute truth and an absolute good, which can only be the absolute Being; and, as St. Thomas remarks, men call this Being God (S. Th. I, q.2, a.3).

The primary energy of the will tends of its own nature to the formation of the personality; and herein lies the key to the mystery of the destiny of individuals, and therefore of the destiny of all peoples and of the ultimate meaning of history. The will, by means of its freedom, moves all a man's energies and potencies: it orders them or disorders them, and may foster them or crush them. This applies not only to man's senses and passions but also to the intelligence and the higher faculties; because the will moves itself, wants itself (because it wants to want) and so frees itself towards freedom. With a daring which transcends all possible unilateralism (whether anarchy or totalitarianism), St. Thomas is able to present man as *causa sui*, because in the moral order man becomes what he wants to be, in other words he becomes that which his liberty chooses for himself. In Sacred Scripture man is said to be created in the image and likeness of God because he is endowed with freedom (S. Th. I-II, Prologus), and freedom (liberum arbitrium), as St. Thomas affirms from his earliest teachings, is recognised as 'universalis motor omnium' (In III Sent. d. 27, q.11, a.3). Thus, and this is the decisive practical conclusion in the formation of personality, moral quality springs from one's freedom: 'Principium autem moris est voluntas; ideo si voluntas fuerit bona, et opus (erit) bonum, cum habeat voluntatem bonam cum intentione bona' (Lectura in Ev. Matt. c. VIII, lect. 2; ed. Marietti n. 661, p. 103b). The reasons behind this statement were studied by St. Thomas in his mature years. He did not limit

himself to examining the transcendental goodness of man as a creature, but saw in acquired moral goodness the realisation of his perfection as a spiritual being. This is one step further than the intellectualism and the classical ideal of *Kalokagathon*: 'Homo secundum suam naturam est bonum secundum quid, non autem simpliciter ... simpliciter autem et totaliter bonus dicitur ex hoc quod habet voluntatem bonam, quia per voluntatem homo utitur omnibus aliis pontentiis. Et ideo bona voluntas facit hominem bonum simpliciter' (Q. de virt. in communi, a.9, ad.15; Marietti 733a). And so it is no mere chance that the angelic message of the coming of the Redeemer is addressed to 'men of good will' (Luke 2:14). These are the men who accept the Gospel, the good news of salvation brought by Christ, the curing of the wound of sin and the raising to the dignity of the sons of God by grace, which is the restitution and growth of freedom.

The paradox of Christianity is that man, created free by God to be in harmony with Him in love and obedience, has used (or rather, abused) his freedom to disobey God, 'gambling' freedom itself, and losing grace and original justice. Once man has cut himself off from God by sin, freedom is besieged from above by pride and from below by passions: and so man, even if he remains nominally free after sinning, is in practice 'the slave of sin', and becomes free once more only in so far as he dominates his passions and defeats the pride of his own *ego*. The whole of the New Testament and its 'message of salvation' consists in this new freedom which is offered to the believer: Jesus promises that in submitting to Christ 'the truth will set you free' (Jn. 8:32). As St. Paul says, we are free from sin in so far as we become 'slaves of Christ' (I Cor. 7:22), that is, born again in his grace as sons and daughters of God, restored to his image transfigured in the participation of divine life. So the only person who is really free is the Christian who is totally docile to the impulses of grace (the movement of grace *ab intra*) so that he becomes perfectly obedient to whoever represents God, either because he is in a position of authority or because he is a poverty-stricken brother in need (the movement of grace *ad extra*). And this is the evangelical message that is grasped in a particular way by those who are founders in the Church of God, and it shines particularly brightly in the doctrine of Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, as we shall now see. It is a paradox, the most profound paradox of existence: but the whole of Christianity is a paradox. Thus the real or 'royal' freedom of man, wounded by sin and weakened in his spirit, lies in the real or 'royal' obedience to God by renouncing the world, by the sufferings of life, and by the longing for eternal life.

This is the lesson of Christian spirituality and mysticism, which, in the absolute subjection of the soul to the interior motions of the Holy Spirit actualises and fulfils the 'law of perfect freedom' (James 1:25; 2:12), and union with Christ gives one a foretaste here on earth of *communion* with the very life of God. This is why we can say that before Christ, and outside

Christianity, true freedom was unknown, as Hegel himself admits (Vorles, *Über die Geschichte der Philosphie, Einleitung*, ed. Jo. Hoffmeister, p. 63; *Enzyklop.* n. 482). But the great philosopher is utterly mistaken when he puts Christian freedom on a level with absolute human reason, and sees its realisation in the unfolding of a self-sufficient universal history, above all in the development of the Germanic nations. Certainly, he does not foresee the advent of Adolf Hitler, a century ahead; but is no mere chance that National Socialism refers back to Hegel: 'The insight which Hegel had concerning the absolute nature of the State in itself has become dominant in the last decade in Germany (and not only in Germany)', (A. Rosenberg, *Der Mythus des 20 Jahrunderts*, (München 1941), p. 525).

This return to paganism of Hitler and Hegel contrasts with the attempt of Kierkegaard, a Christian, to found freedom in God by choosing God as the *basis* of freedom itself and thus in the practical sphere—just as Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer was to do by means of his supernatural insight, the insight of a theologian and of a man of profound Christian faith—the choice of God becomes in its turn the foundation of freedom. This is the 'fear and trembling' with which the Christian has to work out his own salvation. 'The great gift granted to man is the choice of freedom. If you want to keep it safe, there is only one way: that of surrendering it immediately, this very second, giving it utterly and completely to God, and yourself with it' (Papirer 1849-1850, X^2, A428). This is the begining of the 'holy abandonment' whichn is at the root of Christian spirituality and mysticism.

A new man for the new times of the Church of the future, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer grasped intuitively, but also with the help of divine illumination, this original concept of Christian freedom. Immersed in announcing the Gospel message of 'freedom' as 'liberation' from the slavery to sin, he gives confidence to the believer in Christ and, after centuries of Christian spirituality that was based on the priority of obedience, he turns the situation round and makes obedience an expression of freedom, as the fruit is the expression of the flower, or to be more precise, of the root. His declarations intensify and clarify themselves with the passing years, following his own reflections on the Church. Thus in a homily entitled 'Christ triumphs through humility', given on Christmas Eve of 1963, he comments on the text from the Gospel of St. Luke 'erat subditus illis' (Luke 2:51)—contrasting this obedience to the spirit of anarchy, disobedience, intrigues and disunion, of modern times: 'freedom is very close to my heart—that is precisely why I so love the Christian virtue of obedience. We should all realise that we are children of God, and should want to fulfill the will of our Father. We should do things as God wants them done, *because we feel like it*, which is the most supernatural of reasons'. And as though drawing up the balance sheet of his life, he admits openly: 'The spirit of Opus Dei which I have tried to practise and to teach for more than thirty-five years now, has made me understand and love

personal freedom' (*Christ is Passing By*, Veritas Publications (Dublin: 1974), n. 17). A little earlier in a moving homily entitled 'Christ's Death is the Christian's Life', given on Good Friday 1960, he considers the mystery of the Christian history of salvation following on Creation and the Redemption in Christ, and invites us to 'appreciate all that is beautiful and noble, recognising the dignity of each person, made in the image of God. Admire the splendid gift of freedom, which gives us power over our own actions and enables us—with heaven's grace—to build our eternal destiny' (*op. cit.* n. 99). In this he is in full agreement with a deep and surprising affirmation of the Angelic Doctor: 'Quanto aliquis plus habet de caritate, plus habet de libertate' (III Sent. q.29, a.8, Sed contra; Moos III, 945). His personal experience was that a Christian's freedom is an essential pre-condition to his participation in salvation through the grace of Christ. And from this stems his declaration in a style both new and old—as old as the first appearance of Christianity in the world—that: 'God does not want slaves, but children. He respects our freedom. The work of salvation is still going on, and each one of us has a part in it. It is Christ's will, St. Paul tells us in impressive words, that we should fulfill in our flesh, in our life, what is lacking in his Passion, "for the good of His Body, which is the Church" ' (The Great Unknown, Homily given on Whit Sunday, 1969; *op. cit.*, n. 129). In full accord with Vatican II, or even (if one may say so) more boldly, he proposes that the first good to be respected and fostered in a Christian's daily involvement is precisely personal freedom: 'Only if he defends the individual freedom of others—with the personal responsiblity that must go with it—only then can he defend his own freedom with human and Christian integrity' (Homily 'Christ the King', given on the feast of Christ the King, 22 November 1970, *op. cit.* n., 184).

This 'new' approach to Christian spirituality, based on the authority of freedom, comes to birth in Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer not because of some thirsting after novelties or from a mania for 'falling in with the manners of this world' (Rom. 12:2), but rather because of a humble and profound desire to live the Gospel for the men of today. In an inspiring homily with the apt title 'Freedom, Gift of God', dated 10 April 1956, which he gave in the fullness of his spiritual maturity, he declares with a forthrightness worthy of the first Apologists that his mission is to defend personal freedom: 'In the course of my life as a priest, I can say that I have not merely *preached* my love for personal freedom, I have *shouted it aloud*'. And he laments that some people see in this a danger for the faith. And once more, prophetically anticipating the message of Vatican II, but avoiding the equivocal compromises of the postconciliar theologians—those of the 'anthropological about-face', or in other words religious indifference—he states in accordance with the doctrine of Leo XIII: 'I defend *freedom of conscience* with all my strength: it means that nobody is allowed to prevent a person from worshipping God', and 'Our Holy Mother the Church has always come out in favour of freedom, and has rejected all forms of

fatalism, ancient or modern. She has declared that every soul is in control of its own destiny, for good or evil'.

Such is the adventure of Christianity, which implies that God himself is waiting for man's decision. The homily of 25 March 1957, Easter Sunday, contains in this context an expression which may be counted as one of the most daring in the Christian literature of all time: 'God wants us to cooperate with Him in this task which he is carrying out in the world. He *takes a risk with our freedom*. I am deeply moved by the Jesus born in Bethlehem: a defenceless, powerless child, incapable of offering any resistance. God gives Himself up to men, He comes close to us, down to our level' (*Christ is Passing By*, n. 113).

The audacity of the Christian presence in these modern times through a dynamic fidelity to the divine truth: this is the message of Msgr. Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer. For him, as for all Founders, the only way to reach Christ is through his Cross, with Our Lady—His Mother and Our Mother—as a guide: *ad Iesum per Mariam*. Thus the mystery of temporal destiny is illumined by confidence and joyful hope: 'Mary always does the immense favour of bringing to the Cross, of placing face to face with the example of the Son of God, those who come close to her and contemplate her life. It is in this confrontation that Christian life is decided. And here Mary intercedes for us so that our behaviour may lead to a reconciliation of the younger brother—you and me—with the firstborn Son of the Father' (*Christ is Passing By*, n. 149).